

# A patchwork, but no bigger picture

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11 October 2006

The *Wind That Shakes the Barley*, directed by Ken Loach, written by Paul Laverty

The British media are hardly renowned for their objectivity or restraint when discussing the partition of Ireland, Britain's oldest colony. Even so, the abuse heaped upon Ken Loach for his latest film has been remarkable. While *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* was being awarded the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, the right-wing British press was denouncing it as being worse than the work of Nazi propagandists.

Tim Luckhurst, writing in the *Times* of London, excused the film-maker Leni Riefenstahl's support for the Hitler regime on the grounds that she had not fully understood the Nazism she praised. According to Luckhurst, though, Loach "does not deserve such indulgence. He knows precisely what he is doing."

Another Murdoch paper, the *Sun*, called it "pro-IRA." The *Daily Mail* called the film "a travesty." Simon Heffer, in the *Telegraph*, denouncing the film as "poisonous," acknowledged that he had not seen it and declared he did not need to "any more than I need to read *Mein Kampf* to know what a louse Hitler was."

The British film industry took a similarly dismissive attitude to the film. Where French distributors purchased 300 copies, British distributors purchased only 30.

Loach's transgression appears to be twofold.

On one level, it marks a reaction by some of the most unapologetic sections of the British ruling class regarding the bloody history of British imperialism in Ireland. A previous Loach film dealing with covert British operations in Ireland, *Hidden Agenda*, met a similarly hostile reaction from Conservative members of Parliament, who accused it of being pro-IRA.

At the same time, Loach has explicitly connected his film with Iraq, and drawn parallels with resistance to imperialist occupation there. The reaction against the film reflects hostility towards any opposition to this unbridled imperialist plunder.

It is to Loach's credit that he explores questions of the history and political experiences of the working class. He is fundamentally a serious film-maker. That he is such a visible target for the right-wing media testifies both to his persistence, and to the fact that he has been almost alone in pursuing this course. This raises two related questions: to what extent is Loach's film-making artistically successful, and to what extent are the historical-political positions he advances tenable?

*The Wind That Shakes the Barley* is only Loach's second "historical" film (after *Land and Freedom*), if one does not include his treatment of the Nicaraguan revolution in *Carla's Song*. It deals with the period immediately after the First World War. In the aftermath of the Easter Rising in 1916, resistance was growing to the British occupation of Ireland. Sinn Fein had declared itself the Parliament of Ireland (Dail Eireann). The Irish Republican Army (IRA) armed, and the War of Independence began.

The British responded swiftly and brutally. They partitioned the northeast of the country and sent over the "Black and Tans," a paramilitary body of the Royal Irish Constabulary, intended, in Winston

Churchill's words, as a "corps of gendarmerie." Along with the "Auxiliaries," an army body of ex-officers, the "Black and Tans" conducted a terrifying campaign of repression.

In 1921, British Prime Minister Lloyd George promised "immediate and terrible war" if the Dail did not accept his treaty. By a mixture of threats, bribes and lies, Lloyd George managed to gain agreement to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which enshrined the partition of Ireland and made all members of the Irish Provisional Government swear allegiance to the British crown. The British were thus able to split the nationalist forces of Sinn Fein and drive Ireland into civil war.

Loach's film uses two fictional brothers in rural west Ireland to embody the conflicts within the country as a whole during this period. Damien O'Donovan (Cillian Murphy) is about to leave for England to pursue his medical training, but decides to stay after witnessing British repression.

His brother Teddy (Padraic Delaney) is already active in the IRA, and Damien joins him in leading the local detachment. After four British officers are killed, the local landlord (Roger Allam) threatens one young recruit with reprisals against his family. The IRA recruit tips off the soldiers, and the IRA unit is arrested. Teddy is tortured.

In the cells, Damien meets Dan (the excellent Liam Cunningham), a train-driver. Dan, a member of James Larkin's revolutionary syndicalist Irish Transport and General Workers Union, is a veteran of the Dublin socialist movement. Dan joins the unit when some of them escape, aided by a young British soldier of Irish descent. They kidnap the landlord. When news reaches them that the others have been executed in the prison, Damien takes the landlord, and the young IRA recruit who betrayed them, up onto the moors and kills them.

Damien becomes more involved in the guerrilla fighting, leading an ambush on two trucks of Auxiliaries. However, differences begin to emerge over the future of the state they are fighting for. Teddy argues that they need to stay on good terms with local businessmen in order to finance their arms. Damien and Dan argue for the establishment of a workers' republic.

Initial delight at the signing of the peace treaty turns to anger when the terms of the treaty are revealed. Teddy is adamant that this is the best they can get at this point, but Damien and Dan pledge to fight on. Dan is killed in a raid on a police station, and Damien is arrested and sentenced to death. He is executed by a firing squad, presided over by his brother.

Loach, with nearly 40 years of filmmaking behind him, has a preferred method of working. Unusually he shoots a film in chronological order, allowing the actors to experience the story as it unfolds. He also likes to release the script to the cast a scene at a time and only a short time before the filming of each scene, with the aim of making the experience as fresh as possible. However, this tends to reinforce the episodic character of his films.

Here, scenes showing the wider impact of the occupation (as when Damien is called to visit a sick child) seem somewhat perfunctory. The most powerful episodes are those showing the brutality of occupation (the dehumanising round-up of men coming from a hurling match, Teddy's torture in the local garrison), but they underline the extent to which Loach does not succeed in painting a wider picture. Too often, we are left feeling

that the episode has served an immediate utilitarian aim without providing any depth.

Using the brothers to symbolise the divisions of the civil war period is itself somewhat hackneyed. Murphy and, particularly, Delaney give solid performances, but the symbolism of the divided family in the rural southwest presents a political and artistic problem.

Loach has spoken of wanting to show how the occupation and civil war affected the whole country. In practice, his film tends to portray the occupation as the shattering of a rural Irish idyll. While Loach may suggest the pervasiveness of the occupation's brutality, he thereby blunts the notion of a battle going on for a workers' republic, suggested by the script. The working class of Dublin and Belfast is only a distant presence. Despite appeals to events in Dublin, the film remains about divisions within a rural family.

Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty invoke socialist leader James Connolly in the film's political debates, but Loach has admitted that Connolly's ideas carried little sway in the rural southwest. To overcome this, Loach implants the dynamics of class conflict into characters more or less defined as "worker" and "landlord."

Loach has a tendency, in his most didactic material, to resort to ciphers in place of real characters. The film's political discussion is channeled, somewhat artificially, through Dan. It is never specified whether Dan is a member of the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), newly formed at the time of the treaty, but he possesses the militant background of an individual involved with Larkin's ITGWU and the Easter Uprising of 1916.

This raises many issues, but explains little. Larkin formed the ITGWU in the early years of the century, while Connolly was organising textile workers in Ulster. Both came under attack from the bourgeois nationalists of Sinn Fein, who said that the dispute was between nations, not classes.

In 1913, Dublin's employers, determined to crush the threat represented by the ITGWU, locked out their members. This long and bloody dispute was eventually sold out by the leadership of the British trade unions, and Larkin left for America. A socialist opponent of imperialist war, he hailed the Russian Revolution and was invited by the Communist International to represent Ireland—an offer he declined. (The Russian Revolution, which found a massive response in Ireland, receives no mention in Loach's film.)

During the 1913 lock-out, the ITGWU, under constant police attack, formed a workers' defence squad. The Irish Citizens Army, a class-based fighting force, provided the core of the 1916 Easter Uprising. Connolly, who opposed the imperialist war, saw it as a revolutionary opportunity for the Irish working class. He quoted Wilhelm Liebknecht that "The working class of the world has but one enemy—the capitalist class of the world, those of their own country at the head of the list."

Yet the character of Dan, who seems adrift in the rural setting, does not serve to clarify any of the political questions arising from this history. Rather, he becomes a figurehead for Loach's own take on resistance to British imperialism in Ireland.

As in many of Loach's works, there is a pivotal scene of political debate. This is perhaps the most tired of the director's devices: the debates never quite seem to capture the relationships between political and social tendencies in all their richness and complexity. Perhaps Loach's method of working with actors prevents them bringing their best to such scenes. Liam Cunningham and Cillian Murphy struggle here to sound like more than mere pamphleteers.

Damien and Dan argue against the treaty, as it will simply maintain the existing property relations. In Dan's words, it will just change the accents of the powerful. This, it must be said, is well brought out in a raid by pro-treaty militia, paralleling a raid by the "Black and Tans" earlier in the film. "Out with the 'Black and Tans,' in with the 'Green and Tans,' " as one character puts it.

Loach and Laverty clearly oppose limiting the national movement to the creation of a capitalist state. There were certainly arguments against the treaty at the time by those who were for a workers' republic, such as the CPI. When the Provisional Government attacked the Four Courts in Dublin, CPI members fought alongside the anti-treaty forces. In this respect, the film offers a welcome corrective to the promotion of the pro-treaty Michael Collins.

Loach's position, though, still reduces socialists to the role of advising nationalist uprisings. Without examining seriously the state of the workers' movement in Ireland at the time, he cannot look at what an independent perspective for the working class might have been.

Without this, the argument is reduced to calls for more radical tactics to be pursued by a national movement. During the debate, one volunteer, Congo, says that if they stop the campaign, then they will never achieve "freedom." (Martin Lucey's performance is striking, capturing some of the spontaneity of thought that Loach seems to desire but all too often fails to achieve.) However, as is made clear, this campaign is not about a workers' republic, but about securing the territorial integrity of Ireland on essentially capitalist foundations.

Reflecting the weakness of the Irish socialist movement after the persecutions following 1916, this was the main debate within republicanism during the civil war, which was fought out as a bourgeois nationalist struggle. Eamonn de Valera, first president of the Dail, had told Sinn Fein in 1917, "The only banner under which our freedom can be won is the Republican banner.... Some might have faults to find with that and prefer other forms of government.... This is not the time for discussion on the best form of government. This is the time to get freedom."

Loach seems keen to use the history of the southwestern IRA flying columns as inspiration for the actions of Teddy and Damien. (Ernest O'Malley, who was tortured in Dublin Castle, and Tom Barry, who led the Kilmichael Ambush, are both clearly invoked in the characters of the brothers.) By conflating this trend within republicanism with the explicitly socialist standpoint of Connolly, Loach (wittingly or not) blurs the principled dividing lines between bourgeois nationalism and socialist internationalism.

Ultimately, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* confronts the viewer as a highly contradictory work. On the one hand, Loach, because of his one-time association with the revolutionary socialist movement and his ongoing commitment to problems of working class life and consciousness, continues to treat subjects and themes that few other filmmakers approach. Among more serious elements in the international film world, he continues to enjoy a reputation as a highly principled individual. The attacks of the right-wing media in Britain are not accidental or in any way misplaced. They have reason to be hostile to Loach's work in general and his Irish film in particular.

However, his political and artistic limitations ultimately restrict every one of his ventures. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, like other Loach films, seems to hanker after traditional workers' organisations that have collapsed, and betrays a lack of critical insight into the programmatic basis for these failures. Their collapse, including the end of the Soviet Union and the devastating degeneration of the labour movement internationally, has presented every filmmaker on the "left" with a new and complicated situation.

Loach may have responded better than most, but a film like this one exposes all that has not been worked through. Without this, sincerity and sympathy for the working class is not enough to carry him through to artistic success. Adding to the difficulties, Loach's naturalistic, quasi-improvisational method is proving increasingly inadequate for tackling the most complex historical and ideological problems. One is gripped by parts of this film, left quite cold and unconvinced by others.

Given the obvious parallels between the British occupation of Ireland and the contemporary situation in Iraq, with a radicalisation under way

within broad layers of the population, the making of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* could and perhaps *should have* been a major political-artistic event, genuinely affecting and helping to educate a new generation of young people in particular. That it is not is due first and foremost to the film industry's efforts to bury Loach's work, but his film's unclarified and unresolved elements also play a role.



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